

Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national non-profit organization committed to helping more community college students succeed, with a special focus on students of color and low-income students. Achieving the Dream proceeds from the premise that success begets success, using a student-centered model of institutional improvement to create a culture of evidence in which data and inquiry drive broad-based institutional efforts to close achievement gaps and improve student outcomes overall.

Characteristics of Credential Completers

Achieving the Dream is focused on helping students persist to graduation or transfer. Certain attributes are predictors of student success, including: regular class attendance; completion of all assigned readings and work; being attentive in class and participating in class discussions; setting definable goals; and scheduling an adequate amount of study time. However, other student characteristics, including demographics such as race and age, and certain academic characteristics, such as the depth and breadth of developmental needs, or field of study, have also been linked to lower student outcomes. Closing achievement gaps associated with demographics and academic characteristics upon enrollment has been one of the most perennial problems in education.

This issue of *Data Notes* examines the demographic and background characteristics of students who completed certificates or degrees, or transferred within three years of initial enrollment.¹ Students may complete credentials or transfer after three years, but this time span provides a good indication of the relative success of students with different characteristics.² Some of the examined background and academic characteristics may be stronger predictors of student success than others. Through this analysis, an attempt was also made to determine which characteristics had the strongest relationships with completion or transfer rates.³ Gender, race/ethnicity, age, Pell grant status, area of study, developmental referral status, and initial enrollment status were the demographic and background characteristics included.

Who Completes or Transfers?

Overall, 16 percent of Achieving the Dream students completed or transferred⁴ to another insti-

tution within three years of initial enrollment (Figure 1, page 2); 9 percent completed and 7 percent transferred. By race and gender, as past research has indicated, women and Asian/Pacific Islander or White, non-Hispanic students were more likely to complete or transfer than men or students of other racial/ethnic groups.

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Black, non-Hispanic and Hispanic students were the least likely to complete or transfer, with three-year completion/transfer rates of 11 or 12 percent, compared with 18 or 19 percent for White, non-Hispanic or Asian/Pacific Islander students. These differences may represent the intermingling of other factors associated with gender or race/ethnicity; income, family education levels, high school preparation, or learning styles are examples of factors that can be correlated with these demographics, but are not included in the data.

Noteworthy is the fact that there is no significant difference in three-year completion and transfer rates by age group. Past research has

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indicated that older students are less likely than younger students to have successful outcomes, as older students are more likely to attend part-time, have children, or work full-time.⁵ This

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¹ Baseline cohorts for all colleges were included in this analysis: 2003 for Rounds 1, 2, and 3; 2004 for Round 4; 2006 for Cohort 2009; 2007 for Cohort 2010.

² Note: this analysis examines only students who completed credentials or transferred within three years—this is the measure of “success” used in this report. However, there may be students still enrolled at the end of the three year period, and students who subsequently transfer or complete in later years.

³ In this analysis, if a student completed during the first three years, he/she was coded as a “completer”. If there was no completion, transfer status was checked subsequently. Thus, for purposes of this analysis, completion and transfer were mutually exclusive: a student either completed, transferred, or neither. “Transfer” is defined as a transfer to either a 2- or 4-year institution.

⁴ In this analysis, completion and transfer are mutually exclusive, with completion taking precedence over transfers. That is, if a student completed and later transferred, the student is counted as completing rather than both completing and transferring.

⁵ Horn, L. *Confronting the Odds: Students At Risk and the Pipeline to Higher Education*, NCEES 98-094. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, October 1997.



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What Is a Cohort?

A cohort is a group of people studied during a period of time. The individuals in the group have at least one statistical factor—such as when they started college—in common.

The Achieving the Dream 2002 student cohort, for example, is the group of credential-seeking students that attended Achieving the Dream institutions for the first time in fall 2002.

Tracking a cohort makes it possible to compare progress and outcomes of different groups of students (e.g., groups defined by race, age or other demographic characteristics) and to determine if there are gaps in achievement among groups of interest.

Figure 1. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students completing credentials or transferring* within three years of first enrollment

Student characteristic	Percentage completed	Percentage transferred	Percentage completed or transferred
Total	9	7	16
Gender			
Female	10	7	17
Male	9	6	15
Race/ethnicity			
Native American	9	6	15
Asian Pacific Islander	11	8	19
Black, non-Hispanic	6	6	12
White	11	7	18
Hispanic	8	3	11
Age			
Under 23	9	7	16
23–29	11	6	17
30 or older	11	4	16
Pell grant, first term enrolled			
Received Pell grant	9	5	14
Did not receive Pell grant	10	7	17
Major field of study			
Transfer seeking	8	8	16
Terminal major	12	6	18
Undeclared	6	4	10
Developmental referral status			
Referred to any developmental education	7	6	12
Math	6	6	12
English	6	5	11
Reading	6	5	10
Not referred to developmental education	13	8	20
Attendance status, first term enrolled			
Full-time	13	7	20
Half-time	7	6	12
Less than half-time	4	7	11

*If a student completed during the first three years, he/she was coded as a “completer”. If there was no completion, transfer status was checked subsequently. Thus, for purposes of this analysis, completion and transfer were mutually exclusive: a student either completed, transferred, or neither. Note: The baseline cohorts for all Achieving the Dream colleges were included in the analysis (2003 for Rounds 1, 2, and 3; 2004 for Round 4; 2006 for Cohort 2009; 2007 for Cohort 2010). Details may not sum to totals due to rounding.

analysis does not support this finding on this measure.

The receipt of a Pell grant can be an indication of a student being low-income. The results indicate that students who did not receive Pell grants during the first term were more likely to complete or transfer within three years than were students who received Pell grants during the first term, 17 compared with 14 percent. Low-income students may face other barriers to success other than not having enough financial resources for their academic pursuits.

Not surprisingly, students with a declared major in their first term were more likely to complete or transfer than those who did not declare, with students in terminal major fields having the highest three-year completion/transfer rate: 18, 16 and 10 percent, respectively, for students in terminal, transfer and undeclared program fields.⁶ Also not surprising are the findings that students not referred to developmental education were more likely to complete or transfer in three years than those referred, regardless of the subject(s) to which they were referred, and students attending full-time during their first term were more likely to complete or transfer than those attending half- or part-time. The differential in the percentage of students completing/transferring on these two characteristics was approximately 8 percentage points, 20 percent for full-time students compared with 11 to 12 percent for those attending less-than-full-time.

Completion Versus Transfer

Transfer rates are a less certain measure of success than completion rates: Some transfer students return to the original college, “swirl” between several colleges, do not succeed at the subsequent institution, colleges do not always

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know when their students transfer to another institution,⁷ and states differ in terms of their completion and transfer policies. However, the analysis of transfer data provides important and interesting information about student outcomes. The differences in outcomes for students who completed or transferred follow:

- Black, non-Hispanic students were the least likely by race/ethnicity to complete in three

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⁶ Students in a course of study which is preparation or additional training for a specific occupation are described as enrolling in *terminal majors*. Students who begin their education with the goal of transferring to a four-year college to finish bachelor’s degrees are described as *transfer seeking*. Students unsure of their goals or are undeclared, are described as *undeclared*. From S. Clery. “Different Paths for Different Majors,” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*. Vol. 2, No. 1. Jan/Feb 2007.

⁷ Clery, S. and Topper, A. “Returning Students,” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*. Vol. 5, No. 3. May/June 2010.

years, at 6 percent—the overall average was 9 percent. And Hispanic students were, by far, the least likely to transfer within three years, 3 percent compared to an overall average of 7 percent. Closing this achievement gap is a core goal of Achieving the Dream.

- In terms of overall combined completion and transfer rates, there was no difference by age group. Interestingly, however, younger students—those of traditional college age (younger than 23 upon first enrollment)—were less likely to complete within three years than older students, yet slightly more likely to transfer.
- Students in terminal major fields were more likely to complete, while transfer seeking students were more likely to transfer within three years.
- By developmental education status, the overall completion/transfer difference is largely due to differences in completion rates, where non-developmental education students were more likely to complete within three years as compared to students referred to developmental education; the difference in transfer rates was slightly in favor of non-developmental education students.
- Similarly, full-time students' completion rates exceeded those of half- and part-time students by 6 to 9 percentage points, while transfer rates by initial attendance status were similar.

Characteristic Influences

To determine the influence of student background characteristics on three-year completion and transfer rates, a stepwise logistic regression⁸ was conducted. In a stepwise regression, correlations among the various characteristics are taken into account to determine the relative importance of each variable when all are considered together.

The results of the model indicated that all of the included student characteristics were significantly related with completion or transfer within three years. However, three of the characteristics were stronger predictors than the others: Developmental education referral status, attendance status during the first term, and minority status. Students who were not referred to developmen-

tal education, attended full-time during their first term, or were not students of color were more likely to complete or transfer within three years. Major field of study and gender, although related, did not have as much influence on completion and transfer rates. Pell grant receipt status and age had the least influence on the outcomes studied.

What Does it Mean?

This analysis indicates that the characteristics of students coming to college—demographics and academic decisions upon enrollment—influence the potential for a student to complete or transfer within three years. Developmental education referral status, attendance status at initial enrollment, and minority status are the strongest predictors of completion/transfer. These results reinforce previous research, both within Achieving the Dream and in the larger body of higher education research, along with the work conducted by Achieving the Dream colleges—helping improve the success rate overall is important, as is closing the gaps among different groups of students.

The results suggest where colleges should concentrate their efforts to improve outcomes. The strong commitment to improving student success in developmental education and helping students of color overcome the extra barriers to success is corroborated by these results. The results also suggest that providing incentives to students to start their enrollment full-time may be a pathway to success. Colleges might consider the following questions to address these issues:

- What incentives does the college have in place to get students to enroll full-time?
- What approaches have been successful in helping students of color succeed at your college?
- What can be done to help undeclared students find and choose a major?
- What is the most successful solution to helping students succeed in developmental education?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring your college's data, at www.dreamweb.submission.org. ■

Data Notes is a bimonthly publication that examines data to illuminate the challenges facing Achieving the Dream colleges and to chart their progress over time.

This issue of *Data Notes* was written by Sue Clery, Senior Research Associate, JBL Associates, Inc., subcontractor to Achieving the Dream, and edited by Katie Loovis, Achieving the Dream's Director of Strategic Communications & Marketing. Newsletter production by Linda Marcetti, founder of Asterisk & Image, subcontractor to JBL Associates, Inc.

If you have questions regarding this issue, or if there is a topic you would like to see addressed in *Data Notes*, please contact Sue Clery at sclery@jblassoc.com.

Note: This issue of *Data Notes* uses the January 2011 version of the Achieving the Dream National Database. Institutions are grouped by the year they started work with the Achieving the Dream.

⁸ Student characteristics were coded as binomial, or yes/no, variables for inclusion in the model. The variables included in the model were: male/not male; minority/not minority; younger than 23/not younger than 23; terminal/not terminal major; academic/not academic major (undeclared major field was not coded to eliminate the chance of multi-collinearity); full-time/not full-time; Pell grant recipient/not Pell grant recipient; referred to any developmental education/not referred.